

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 002715

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CASC](#) [TBIO](#) [GR](#) [AVIANFLU](#)

SUBJECT: BIRD FLU IN GREECE; AUTHORITIES TESTING FOR H5N1 VARIANT

REF: SECSTATE 183776

1. (SBU) Minister of Agricultural Development Basiakos announced October 17 that the first case of avian influenza (H5) has occurred in Greece. Basiakos noted that the affected birds lived on the small island of Oinousses, near Chios, in the eastern Aegean. According to Angelos Hatzakis, Chairman of the Center for the Control and Prevention of Diseases, the Athens lab of the Veterinary Department found the presence of the virus in a live bird from the affected flock of 30 birds, of which 10 have died. In order to ascertain the exact strain of the virus found, the GOG has sent samples to the state reference laboratory in Thessaloniki. In a related development, ANA reports that three dead birds have been found at Evros, near the Greco-Turkish border; the carcasses have been forwarded to the Thessaloniki testing facility.

2. (U) The Agriculture Ministry announced October 18 that it was banning the movement of poultry products to and from the area around Oinousses: "After coordinating with Commissioner on Health and Consumer's protection issues Markos Kyprianou and the competent Veterinary Authorities of the EU, we instructed the Prefecture of Chios to forbid, strictly for precautionary reasons, the forwarding of live poultry, meat of poultry and other poultry products from the Prefecture of Chios to the other Prefectures of the country, the country-members of the European Union and to third countries."

3. (U) ANA notes that the Greek authorities have informed the European Commission of the developments. For its part, the EC has issued the following statement: "The samples are in the process of being sent for confirmation and virus isolation tests to the national reference laboratory in Thessaloniki, and the Commission requested that they also be sent immediately to the Community Reference Laboratory in Weybridge, England."

Embassy Receives Low Number of AmCit Calls

4. (SBU) So far post has received a limited number of calls from concerned U.S. citizens. Post is currently drafting a warden message along the lines used by Embassy Ankara to be released through the warden network and on the Embassy website should the Thessaloniki lab confirm the presence of H5N1 virus in the dead birds.

Press Reaction under Control ... So Far

5. (SBU) The Greek media has been fairly restrained in its reporting, mostly sticking to the facts. Although some television journalists have been painting an apocalyptic picture of what this means to Greece, the experts they have interviewed on their programs have stressed that people should not panic and that the GoG is taking the proper steps to examine and contain the outbreak. News reports are also saying that demand for flu shots has ballooned. According to Kathimerini, the National Pharmaceutical Organization took anti-viral medicines off the over-the-counter list as panic buying emptied pharmacies of the medicine.

Economic Effects Potentially Serious

6. (SBU) The economic effects of the potential outbreak could be serious, extending from agriculture to tourism and beyond. In the near term, the ban on the movement of poultry products from the Chios prefecture will be fairly limited in its economic impact. Should the dead Turkeys from Oinoussa be found to have suffered from the H5N1 virus, however, or should birds in other parts of Greece be found to have flu, the impact on the agricultural sector could grow quickly. The initial effect on tourism has been to reduce the travel of Greeks to other countries hit by avian influenza, Turkey and Romania. According to Kathimerini, Greece's National Tourism Organization has developed action plans to deal with the impact of a finding that the flu strain found in Greece is dangerous to humans.

Comment

17. (SBU) Although the announcement that avian flu had hit Greece has been front page news, the real health impact of the news is fairly minor. Only a limited number of birds in Greece have been affected to this point. Above and beyond that, however, there has been no/no mention of any possibility of bird-to-human, let alone human-to-human transmission of any avian flu in Greece. We believe the Greek Government is moving quickly to establish exactly what form of virus affected the dead poultry and will act quickly to limit its spread within the country. Septel(s) will:

- 1A. Confirm what type of virus was present in the dead birds;
- 1B. Report on preparations GoG is taking to deal with any outbreak;
- 1C. Report on Embassy meeting of October 14 to implement action steps outlined in reftel.

Post will also clear any information it will place on its website and send to wardens with CA via e-mail.
RIES